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Aide to Bush Opened Doors For Guerrilla War Expert

Vice President Got Data on Salvador Rebels

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It was a typical meeting of the type that Vice President Bush often holds in private: a small group, involving participants with firsthand knowledge of intelligence and global trouble spots. Bush, the former director of central intelligence, often asks for "raw" intelligence material on a subject, the kind of information he could get from Felix Rodriguez.

The meeting was held Jan. 24, 1985, in Bush's office. It included his national security affairs adviser, Donald P. Gregg. Also attending were Lt. Col. Oliver North of the National Security Council and Rodriguez.

Rodriguez, also known as Max Gomez, is a veteran of the Bay of Pigs invasion and an expert in guerrilla warfare known for his long and bitter opposition to Cuban leader Fidel Castro. He was in Washington meeting with American military and intelligence officials. Officials familiar with his visit said he was discussing ways to help El Salvador repulse a leftist guerrilla insurgency.

The meeting grew out of a long friendship with Gregg that has recently figured in a renewed controversy over President Reagan's drive to assist the rebels fighting the Sandinista government of Nicaragua after Congress voted to cut off aid to the rebels, known as contras.

The crash of a C123K cargo plane in Nicaragua Oct. 5 carrying weapons for the contras has reopened questions about how deeply and directly the administration was involved in helping the rebels during that period.

The sole survivor of the crash,

Eugene Hasenfus, has said that Rodriguez was directing the supply mission for the Central Intelligence Agency. The administration has denied any involvement in the supply mission. Three others died in the crash. The flight originated at Ilopango air base in El Salvador.

Reagan and Bush encouraged such private efforts to aid the contras, but the full extent of the administration's contacts with these operations remains unclear.

Bush has said he did not direct or coordinate the effort to aid the contras in violation of the law. Other officials have expressed doubt whether Gregg, a low-key but loquacious CIA veteran, could have played a central role in helping the rebels.

Gregg has been unavailable for comment since the Oct. 5 crash. He is traveling in India and Pakistan as part of a University of California program.

Gregg has told associates that he had frequent contact with Rodriguez, including recent telephone calls. But he has claimed his contacts were on the subject of El Salvador.

Gregg was instrumental in bringing Rodriguez to the attention of U.S. officials, the sources said. He set up appointments in Washington for Rodriguez, including a session with North, who has been the contact at the National Security Council on Central American issues and the contras. Gregg also wrote a letter or message of introduction on behalf of Rodriguez to Salvadoran military officials, who wanted the endorsement before using Rodriguez in planning and carrying out airborne attacks on guerrillas there.

Rodriguez "went down there with the blessings of the people he had met with here," said one high-rank-

ing administration official. Rodriguez specialized in "lightning" airborne assaults on guerrillas, a technique he had used in Vietnam, officials said.

The Salvadoran chief of staff, however, has contradicted statements from Bush and his aides, saying he knew nothing of Rodriguez's role and had not approved any such participation by an American.

The high-ranking administration official speculated that Rodriguez switched his activities from Salvador to the contras at some point in the last two years. "It's the nature of these people," the official said. "It would be like sending a campaign operative to Louisiana, and he turns up in Texas."

Rodriguez had two other contacts with Bush. He met with the vice president again in Washington last May 6, and on May 20 appeared at a reception in Miami for Bush, who had delivered a speech there on Cuban independence day. Bush has said they did not talk about the contras.

Those later meetings were held after Rodriguez reportedly began working with the contra supply operation, but Bush has told associates that he recalls no discussions with Rodriguez about anything other than El Salvador.

Bush recently called Rodriguez a "patriot," and officials said the vice president is not concerned about the questions raised by his contacts with Rodriguez. The officials added that Bush has known Gregg since they served together at the CIA, and the vice president believes it is not necessary to offer any further details about Gregg's activities beyond the statements he has already made.

Bush, considered the front-runner for the 1988 Republican presidential nomination, has said privately that he expects to reap domestic political benefits from the controversy over Rodriguez. Bush said it may help him win over skeptical conservatives who have long regarded him as a symbol of the establishment and who may play a pivotal role in deciding the nomination.

However, the contra issue also has a political downside. Pollsters have warned Bush that Americans remain deeply skeptical of the need for further involvement in the Nicaraguan conflict and that they are motivated by fear of another Vietnam-like engagement. In the past, Reagan strategists have found that every speech by the president on the issue tends to bring out more vocal opposition than support.

Bush got a taste of this recently when protesters showed up at some of his campaign stops, one of them carrying a placard, "Bush World Airways—Gunrunners to the World."

The vice president served as director of central intelligence in the final year of the Ford administration, a period during which the agency was going through a series of congressional investigations. It was there that Bush got to know Gregg, his future national security affairs adviser.

Gregg, 58, was graduated from Williams College in 1951, where he was a philosophy major. He then went into the CIA, where he spent much of the next 25 years overseas in Asia. Gregg served in Rangoon, Tokyo and Vietnam in 1970-72, which is where he may have first met Rodriguez. He served as the agency's station chief in South Korea from 1973 to 1976.

On his return to the United States, Gregg served as liaison to the House Select Intelligence Committee, chaired by Rep. Otis Pike (D-N.Y.), which was conducting an investigation of the agency. Gregg has said the job was one of the most difficult of his life. Like many CIA officials, Gregg felt that morale at the agency reached a nadir in 1975 with the House and Senate investigations and the assassination of CIA station chief Richard Welch in Athens.

When President Carter took office in 1977, Gregg became part of

a small "central staff" of the directorate of operations, the covert side of the agency, in charge of informing Director Stansfield Turner about activities there. Gregg was detailed to the National Security Council staff in 1979, coordinating intelligence and later as a specialist on Asia.

David Aaron, who was deputy national security affairs adviser in the Carter administration, said Gregg was "very insightful and helpful" as liaison between the NSC staff and the CIA. "He had a broad view of policy questions," Aaron recalled. "The problem at the White House isn't that you don't get enough intelligence, it's that you don't get what you want. He was very good" at getting what was needed, Aaron said.

Gregg became Bush's national security affairs adviser in 1982, when another former intelligence official, Daniel Murphy, was the vice president's chief of staff.

Gregg, who has a soft-spoken but loquacious manner, is described by acquaintances as a career intelligence official who believes in moderation. A former colleague called him "level-headed, nonideological." Gregg has referred to the "lunatic right" in a workshop he teaches at Georgetown University on "Force and Diplomacy." He is known to believe that covert intelligence operations are necessary, but only if they are truly covert, unlike the highly publicized U.S. effort to aid the contras.

Gregg has been criticized by some colleagues on Bush's staff for what they describe as an insensitivity to domestic political considerations. For example, they said, Gregg originated the proposal for Bush to visit Syria on a trip to the Mideast last summer, a trip intended to showcase Bush's commitment to Israel. Bush did not go to Syria. Gregg has sometimes criticized

U.S. policy toward Israel as too generous, others said, and has suggested that moderate Arab nations should receive more attention.

Several administration policy makers expressed doubt that Gregg would be involved in such a delicate U.S. operation as helping the contras. Bush has often taken a personal role in national security debates in the administration, aides said. This has put Gregg in a secondary role.

The vice president "is always interested in direct intelligence information from around the world," said Craig L. Fuller, his current chief of staff, who added that Bush prefers small meetings and one-on-one sessions with visiting diplomats and others.

This is how the first session with Rodriguez came about, other officials said. Gregg set up meetings at the State Department, the Defense Department and elsewhere for Rodriguez and made the vice president's office the last stop.

Staff writer Charles R. Babcock contributed to this report.